

*Swedish Missiological Themes, 94, 1 (2006)*

## **Did Jesus Teach about Wisdom and *Kamma*? A Critical Analysis of a Buddhist Bible Interpretation\***

*Kari Storstein Haug*

Did Jesus teach about wisdom and *Kamma*?<sup>1</sup> Yes, says Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, a famous Thai monk, on the basis of a reading of selected passages from the Gospels: "In the New Testament there are many points in agreement with Buddhism or the *Tripitaka* which account for the Buddhist attitude towards Christianity; namely that the latter is a religion of action and of self-help based on wisdom, and not a religion based on mere faith as is generally understood."<sup>2</sup>

Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu (1906-1993) is regarded as one of the most important interpreters of Buddhism in modern Thailand.<sup>3</sup> His aim was to show the

---

\* This article is an expanded and revised version of a paper, titled "Christianity as a Religion of Wisdom and *Kamma*: A Thai Buddhist Interpretation of Selected Passages from the Gospels", read at Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) International Meeting, June 26 - July 1, 2005 in Singapore. A summary of the paper read at the conference will be published in *The Council of Societies for the Study of Religion (CSSR) Bulletin* in its April 2006 issue.

<sup>1</sup> The concepts of *Wisdom*, *Kamma* and *The law of Kamma* are shortly introduced in note 9. The word *Kamma* is usually not translated when referred to in scholarly discussion, so therefore I will use the word as it is in my further presentation. Hereafter, I will also use the word without italics and capital letter. The reason that I use the word "*kamma*" instead of "*karma*", which may be more familiar in the West, is that Buddhism in Thailand is part of the Theravada school and thus uses the Pali canon of *Tripitaka* (the Buddhist Scriptures). The word *kamma* comes from Pali, while *karma* is Sanskrit.

<sup>2</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, *Christianity and Buddhism*, trans. Venerable Punno et al., Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lecture, Fifth Series (Bangkok: Sublime Life Mission, 1967). 59.

<sup>3</sup> In his survey article "Buddhist Studies in Thailand" Somporn Promta characterises Buddhādāsa as one of the three most influential Buddhist scholars in Thailand, and one of the two "most outstanding interpreters of Buddhism in Thailand over the past twenty-five years". Somporn Promta, "Buddhist Studies in Thailand," in *The State of Buddhist Studies in the World 1972-1997*, ed. Donald K. Swearer and Somporn Promta (Bangkok: Center for Buddhist Studies Chulalongkorn University, 2000). 21.

relevance of Buddhism for a modern time and a modern society, and he consequently interpreted Thai Buddhist tradition in new ways, both in terms of soteriology and ethics.<sup>4</sup> He was equally concerned with how religion could be a tool for peace and harmony, and therefore engaged in dialogue with people of other faiths, including Christianity. According to Buddhādāsa, there are many misunderstandings among people concerning religious beliefs and the relationship between religions. His own experience was that many Westerners, with Christian background, visited his temple (Suan Mokh, Surat Thani) in the South of Thailand and wished to become Buddhists. It was, however, Buddhādāsa's opinion that this change of religion would not have been necessary if Christian leaders had read the Bible with insight and imparted the deeper message of Christianity, namely that Christianity, like Buddhism, is a religion of wisdom and *kamma*.<sup>5</sup>

In February 1967 Buddhādāsa was invited to give the fifth Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lecture at Thailand Theological Seminary in Chiang Mai. He gave three lectures, all concerning the comparison of Christianity with Buddhism. These were later translated into English and published as a booklet titled *Christianity and Buddhism*.<sup>6</sup> These lectures present Buddhādāsa's own understanding of Christianity, and compare it with Buddhist beliefs. In his comparison, Buddhādāsa's starting point is that from a Buddhist viewpoint he regards Christian teaching as being in agreement with Buddhism. In order to prove this, he chooses to start with a comparison between Christianity and Buddhism with regard to the point where, according to Buddhādāsa, the two religions differ the most. That is "whether Christianity teaches self-help or relies on external help rendered by anybody else."<sup>7</sup>

According to Buddhādāsa, Buddhism is a typical self-help religion, while Christianity normally is presented as a religion where humans cannot help themselves, but depend on external help, that is, a God that can help and save them. But, argues Buddhādāsa, this stress on faith and dependence on

<sup>4</sup> Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhādāsa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand*, 2nd ed. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003). 33-36. Jackson's book is a good introduction to Buddhādāsa's main teachings.

<sup>5</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu. 48-49.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. The three lectures are titled: "Mutual Understanding of Each Other's Religion"; "Father, Son and Holy Spirit"; and "Redemption and Consummation".

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 31.

a God is an expression for a very superficial understanding of Christianity.<sup>8</sup> In his lectures about Christianity and Buddhism, he therefore analyses texts from the Gospels in order to demonstrate that Jesus' teaching is in accordance with Buddhists teaching on wisdom and *kamma*. And, based on a study of the Bible, he argues, "Christianity like Buddhism, is a religion of Wisdom and *Kamma*".<sup>9</sup> When comparing Christianity with Buddhism, Buddhādāsa is eager to stress that the points to be compared must first and foremost be taken from the textual sources of the respective religions, i.e. the Bible and *Tripitaka*, as the traditional teachings, commentaries and so forth may have distorted or changed the true message.<sup>10</sup> Within the Bible and *Tripitaka*, however, not all texts should be considered as equally authentic. The hermeneutical key for selecting passages to study seems to be that which can "guide man on his way to emancipation"; and with regard to Christianity, Buddhādāsa contends that such kind of teaching is contained in Jesus' own teachings in the Gospels.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the Old Testament for example, needs not to be of interest except for religious specialists.<sup>12</sup>

In this article I will critically analyse examples of Buddhādāsa's interpretation of selected Gospel passages, in order to explore how he reaches

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 31-38.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 38. Wisdom in this context mainly means freethinking, observation and reasoning, see *ibid.* 36. *Kamma* means intentional action or activity, broadly understood as including mental activity. All human intentional activity and behaviour are therefore *kamma*. These actions are governed by the law of *kamma*, which is considered as a basic law of nature. The law of *kamma* states that the basic relationship between act and consequences is a cause and effect relationship. This means that every action has a corresponding effect or consequence. The effect is not determined by a god or by society, but comes naturally from the act or action. Furthermore, the relationship between act and consequence is not arbitrary; the effect corresponds with the act. From this follows that each individual is responsible for its own *kamma* and the results that *kamma* leads to. It is also only the individual man or woman that can act in such a way that he or she does not longer come under the law of *kamma*, but becomes enlightened. This type of *kamma* that leads to enlightenment, Buddhādāsa calls the highest form of *kamma*, or *kamma* over *kamma*. See for example Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, *Buddha-Dhamma for Students*, trans. Roderick S. Bucknell, 2nd. ed. (Bangkok: Vuddhidhamma Fund, 1988). 24-27.

<sup>10</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, *Christianity and Buddhism*. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 26-28. Within the Buddhist scriptures Buddha's teaching about the Noble Eightfold path is considered sufficient in giving knowledge about how to practice to reach enlightenment.

<sup>12</sup> Buddhādāsa states: "My personal opinion is that *Christians in the days of Jesus* could practise according to the teaching of Christ to gain the highest Fruits without caring for the lengthy Old Testament." Ibid. 26.

his conclusion that Jesus teaches about wisdom and *kamma*. The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I introduce shortly Buddhādāsa's theory of "two-languages". The theory is crucial to his reinterpretations of Buddhist scriptures, but also, in my opinion, central to his interpretation of biblical texts.<sup>13</sup> Second, I present and analyse Buddhādāsa's Bible interpretation, or, to be more precise, his New Testament or Gospel interpretation. Third, I analyse in more detail the main presuppositions that makes his interpretation possible, before I conclude with a critical assessment of it.

### The "Two-Language" Theory – A Short Presentation

Buddhādāsa states that there exist two kinds of language, which relate to two different forms of experience and knowledge. He names the languages "Everyday language" and "*Dhamma* language", giving the following definition: "Everyday language is worldly language, the language of people who do not know *Dhamma*. *Dhamma* language is the language spoken by people who have gained a deep insight into the Truth, into *Dhamma*."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Scholars studying Buddhādāsa generally note the importance of the "two-language" theory to Buddhādāsa's interpretation of Buddhism. See for example the discussion in Donald K. Swearer, "Buddha, Buddhism and Bhikku Buddhadasa," in *Radical Conservatism: Buddhism in the Contemporary World. Articles in Honour of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa's 84th Birthday Anniversary*, ed. Sulak Sivaraksa, Pracha Hutannuvatra, and Nicholas P. Kholar (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development and International Network of Engaged Buddhists, 1990). Pataraporn Sirikanchana, "Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and the Buddhist Hermeneutics," in *Radical Conservatism: Buddhism in the Contemporary World. Articles in Honour of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa's 84th Birthday Anniversary*, ed. Sulak Sivaraksa, Pracha Hutannuvatra, and Nicholas P. Kholar (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development and International Network of Engaged Buddhists, 1990). Jackson. 69-99. Two articles that especially comment on the importance of the theory in relation to Buddhadasa's dialogue with Christianity are: Santikaro Bhikkhu, "Jesus and Christianity in the Life and Work of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu," in *Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus: Papers of the Third Conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies (St. Ottilien 1999)*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Thomas Josef Götz, and Gerhard Köberlin (St. Ottilien: EOS-Verlag, 2001). Donald K. Swearer, *Dialogue: The Key to Understanding Other Religions*, ed. Howard Clark Kee, Biblical Perspectives on Current Issues (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1977).

<sup>14</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "Two Kinds of Language: Everyday Language & Dhamma Language," in *Key to Natural Truth*, ed. Santikaro Bhikkhu (Bangkok: The Dhamma Study & Practice Group, 1988). 15. "Everyday language" is a translation of the Thai expression *phasaa khon*. "*Phasaa*" denotes "language", while "*khon*" is the common word for "(ordinary) people". "*Dhamma* language" is a translation of "*phasaa thamm*". "*Thamm*" is the Thai rendering of the Pali word "*Dhamma*" ("Dharma" in Sanskrit). *Dhamma* has...

Even though Buddhādāsa stresses that these are two kinds of language, two modes of speaking, these are not different languages in a linguistic sense. In terms of words and sentence structure they are identical.<sup>15</sup> The difference lies in the level of insight the user of the language has, and the intended referents of the language. *Dhamma* language and Everyday language are consequently not two different languages, but two different levels of the same language, where *Dhamma* language represents a higher understanding than Everyday language.<sup>16</sup>

The referent of Everyday language is the physical, material world, whereas *Dhamma* language is based upon and refers to the non-physical, mental world.<sup>17</sup> Everyday language is the language spoken in the daily life, based on sense experience, used about mundane affairs. *Dhamma* language is a spiritual language, penetrating beyond the literal meaning to the profound spiritual truth and meaning hidden within all things (*Dhamma*).<sup>18</sup> The two languages thus refer to different matters. Consequently, in order to master both languages, knowledge about, and insight into, both the physical and non-physical world is needed. All people master Everyday language, but Buddhādāsa stresses that not all understand and speak *Dhamma* language, because it requires insight into the mental world and thus *Dhamma*.<sup>19</sup>

---

...a wide range of meaning and is usually left not translated, and I follow that practice. In the following presentation in this article, the word will not be marked by italics. In the quote by Buddhādāsa we see that he equates it with the word "truth", which is one of the most common words used to render *Dhamma* if it is translated into English. According to Buddhādāsa, *Dhamma* in general has four aspects. That is: *Dhamma* as the nature of things, *Dhamma* as the law of nature, *Dhamma* as duty performed according to the law of nature, and *Dhamma* as fruits of practice, or of realization. See for example Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, *Christianity and Buddhism*. 67-69. See also the discussion of *Dhamma* in Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "Two Kinds of Language: Everyday Language & Dhamma Language." 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> See Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "Two Kinds of Language: Everyday Language & Dhamma Language.", where the main body of the speech is an interpretation of single words in terms of their meaning both in Everyday language and *Dhamma* language. I give some examples in the last main section in this article.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 47, 50.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>18</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "Looking Within," in *Key to Natural Truth*, ed. Santikaro Bhikkhu (Bangkok: The Dhamma Study & Practice Group, 1988). 70.

<sup>19</sup> How, according to Buddhādāsa, this insight can be acquired is discussed later in the article under the sub-heading "An interpreter with insight is needed".

## Presentation and Analysis of Buddhadâsa's Bible interpretation

### The interpretation of selected Bible passages concerning Christianity as a religion of *kamma*

Buddhadâsa discusses 16 verses or passages in relation to the question of Christianity as a religion of *kamma*. With the exception of two passages, which are from the Gospel of John, all the references are taken from the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>20</sup> I will here present his discussion of some of them, choosing examples, which ensure that all the main points he makes in his argumentation are presented.

John 6:68: "...*thou hast the words of eternal life.*"

The main point that Buddhadâsa stresses in connection with this verse is that in order to receive eternal life, a life of practice in accordance with Jesus' teaching is the decisive factor. It is not possible to gain eternal life

---

<sup>20</sup> Buddhadâsa discusses the following texts. Buddhadâsa Bhikkhu, *Christianity and Buddhism*. 39-46. The texts are cited like he does in his discussion, including the italics or lack thereof. In the bread text, however, I will mark all the Bible citations with italics. John 6:68: "...*thou hast the words of eternal life.*"; John 6:63: "*It is the Spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.*"; Matt 21:21: "...if only you have faith and have no doubts...you need only to say to this mountain, 'be lifted from your place and hurled into the sea, and what you say will be done.'"; Matt 17:20: "...if you have faith no bigger than a mustard-seed, you will say to this mountain, 'move from here to there', and it will move; nothing will prove impossible for you."; Matt 14:32: The story of Jesus catching hold of Peter, saving him from sinking in the lake, and blaming Peter for having little faith; Matt 6:14-15: "*For if you forgive other (sic) the wrongs they have done, your heavenly Father will also forgive you...*"; Matt 7:18-20: Buddhadâsa does not cite from this parable about a tree and its fruits, but sums up what he regards as the parable's main message, namely that "*a person is recognized as good or bad by his actions*" Buddhadâsa Bhikkhu, *Christianity and Buddhism*. 42; Matt 6:33: "*Set your mind on God's kingdom and his justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well.*"; Matt 7:2: "*...and whatever measure you deal out to others will be dealt back to you.*"; Matt 7:12: "Always treat others as you would like them to treat you."; Matt 7:7: "Ask, and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened..."; Matt 11:29: "Bend your necks to my yoke..."; Matt 12:33: "*Either make the true (sic) good and its fruit good, or make the true (sic) bad and its fruit bad.*"; Matt 12:50: "Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of my heavenly father is my brother, my sister, my mother."; Matt 18:35: "And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you, unless you each forgive your brother from your hearts."; Matt 19:17: "...*but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.*"

through faith alone.<sup>21</sup> His argument goes as follows: The concept "eternal life" has to be understood and interpreted as *Dhamma* language. This means that ultimately it concerns the question of truth, and as a consequence it cannot be understood by faith alone. Buddhadâsa supports his argument by using Peter as an example. Even though Peter was an uneducated man, his wisdom is demonstrated by the fact that he renounced his former meaningless life and chose a different way. It was this wisdom that enabled him to understand eternal life.<sup>22</sup>

Matt 21:21: "...if only you have faith and have no doubts...you need only to say to this mountain, 'be lifted from your place and hurled into the sea, and what you say will be done.'"

Matt 17:20: "...if you have faith no bigger than a mustard-seed, you will say to this mountain, 'move from here to there', and it will move; nothing will prove impossible for you."

Buddhadâsa uses these passages to argue for the following: "What is generally known as faith, does in fact imply a concentrated mind which results from activity with clear comprehension and earnest aspirations for something higher." And he therefore concludes that a religion based on this teaching is not a religion of faith, but rather "a system of action to be practised with the highest wisdom concerning God."<sup>23</sup> His argument in relation to these Gospel passages is based on the understanding that the word "mountain" must be interpreted as *Dhamma* language, meaning "selfishness".<sup>24</sup> The meaning of "moving mountains" is thus to "get rid of selfishness". Faith must then be interpreted accordingly, as that which makes it possible to free oneself of selfishness, namely a concentrated mind, not blind faith or a faith believing just because some authority instructs one to do so.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Buddhadâsa Bhikkhu, *Christianity and Buddhism*. 39.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 39.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>24</sup> The expression used by Buddhadâsa here is not "interpreted in *Dhamma* language", but "interpreted in the Buddhist way". In my understanding, however, this means that Buddhadâsa understands the expression as *Dhamma* language, but expresses it in Buddhist terms. Cf his statement in Ibid. 7: "Buddhists can accept all passages of Christianity as in agreement with the Buddha's teaching if they are allowed to interpret the language of *Dhamma* in the Bible in their own terms."

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 41.

Matt 6:14-15: "*For if you forgive other (sic) the wrongs they have done, your heavenly Father will also forgive you...*"

The point that Buddhадāsa stresses concerning these verses is similar to his argument above. He states that in order to attain emancipation, faith and prayer are not sufficient. The main idea in these verses is namely that action (forgive others) is essential in order to be free from wrong. One's own action comes first; God, or *kamma*, must then respond accordingly. "God helps those who help themselves."<sup>26</sup>

Matt 6:33: "*Set your mind on God's kingdom and his justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well.*"

The stress in this verse, according to Buddhадāsa, is on *kamma* or action on its highest level, which is characterised by complete cessation of suffering. His argument goes as follows: On the surface it may look as if this verse says that faith is needed first, and that everything then will come to you; but interpreted in the Buddhist way, as *Dhamma* language, the meaning is different. In *Dhamma* language to "set your mind on God's kingdom" means to be free of all attachments and to give all things back to God or *Dhamma*. The result is freedom and no suffering.<sup>27</sup>

Matt 7:2: "*...and whatever measure you deal out to others will be dealt back to you.*"

This verse expresses the law of *kamma*, according to Buddhадāsa. Also here does the two-language theory plays an important role in his interpretation. Buddhадāsa argues that there is someone who deals "back to you", and this someone has to be understood according to the language of *Dhamma* as God, interpreted as the law of *kamma*.<sup>28</sup>

To sum up the main point made by Buddhадāsa in his discussion of Christianity as a religion of *kamma*, we note that he stresses the following points: First he argues that none of the verses speak of faith, in the sense of blind acceptance, but either of faith as understanding based on actions, or as action itself. Faith as blind acceptance is thus an interpretation in terms of Everyday language, while in *Dhamma* language faith corresponds to an understanding based on action (*kamma*) or action itself. Secondly,

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 41-42.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 42-43.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 44.



Buddhadâsa makes the point that in the verses discussed, God has the same role as the law of *kamma*; this supports his understanding that, in the language of *Dhamma*, God and the law of *kamma* are the same thing, or reflect the same reality. Finally, he finds in one of the texts a stress on action on such a high level that it leads to enlightenment, which corresponds to *kamma* on its highest level.

### **The interpretation of selected Bible passages concerning Christianity as a religion of wisdom**

After discussing whether Christianity can be understood as a religion of *kamma*, Buddhadâsa continues his comparison of Buddhism and Christianity by discussing whether or not Christianity can also be understood as a religion of wisdom. Here he refers to 9 passages from the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>29</sup> I will present his discussion of seven of them.

*Matt 13:23*: "But the seed that fall (sic) into good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it, who accordingly bears fruit, and yields a hundredfold, it may be, sixtyfold or thirtyfold."

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 47-52. Buddhadâsa discusses the following texts, which are quoted like he does in his discussion including the italics or lack thereof. In the bread text, however, I will mark all the citations with italics. Matt 18:7: "*Woe to the world for the temptation to sin,*" or in some editions, "*Alas for the world that such cause of stumbling arise...*"; Matt 13:23: "But the seed that fall (sic) into good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it, who accordingly bears fruit, and yields a hundredfold, it may be, sixtyfold or thirtyfold."; Matt 13:20-21: "*The seed sown on rocky ground stands for the man who on hearing the word, accepts it at once with joy; but as it strikes no root in him he has no staying-power, and when there is trouble or persecution on account of the word he falls away at once.*"; Matt 7:4-5: "...or how can you say to your brother, '*Let me take the speck out of your eye*', when all the time there is that plank in your own? You hypocrite. First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's."; Matt 12:13: "...So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."; Matt 12:6,8: "*I tell you, there is something greater than the temple here...For the Son of man is sovereign over the Sabbath.*"; Matt 15:1-2,11: "Why do your disciples break the old established tradition? They do not wash their hands before meals...A man is not defiled by what goes into his mouth, but what comes out of it."; Matt 15:18-20: "... But what comes out of the mouth has it origins in the heart; and that is what defiles a man. Wicked thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, perjury, slander, these all proceed from the heart; and these are the things that defile a man; but to eat without first washing his hands, that cannot defile him."; Matt 12:50: This verse is not quoted, just paraphrased: "To him (Jesus) whoever does the will of his heavenly Father is his brother, his sister, his mother."

Matt 13:20-21: *"The seed sown on rocky ground stands for the man who on hearing the word, accepts it at once with joy; but as it strikes no root in him he has no staying-power, and when there is trouble or persecution on account of the word he falls away at once."*

Buddhadâsa's argues that the main point expressed in these two passages is that Jesus wants followers that have wisdom rather than faith. That is followers who understand the message they hear, and do not just believe it, without understanding.<sup>30</sup> The way Buddhadâsa argues for this point is as follows: He takes as his point of departure the sentence in verse 23 *"...who hears the word and understands..."* and rephrases the meaning from a Buddhist perspective: "Jesus wants a follower who understands the word he hears and not just believes what he hears".<sup>31</sup> He is obviously interpreting this out of a presupposition that there is a contrast between understanding and believing. Furthermore he argues that verses 20-21 give the reason why Jesus wants such kind of followers. That is because the ones who understand stay firm, but the ones who just believe are easily uprooted from, or shaken in, their belief. We then see that these verses are interpreted on the basis of the same contrast between believing and understanding as in verse 23.<sup>32</sup>

Matt 7:4-5: *"...or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye', when all the time there is that plank in your own? You hypocrite. First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's."*

Also when commenting on this verse Buddhadâsa argues that Jesus stresses wisdom rather than faith. Buddhadâsa compares this verse to two verses in *Dhammapada* (Attavagga 2-3) and interprets the Gospel passage through the *Dhammapada* text. This text stresses that an instructor should "be established in the virtues in which one is going to instruct others", which means that the instructor must instruct himself first.<sup>33</sup> In light of the comparison, Buddhadâsa concludes that the removal of the plank in Jesus' parable involves wisdom rather than faith.

<sup>30</sup> At this point in his discussion Buddhadâsa argues that even though Christianity obviously is a religion of wisdom, the leaders representing Christianity only talk about faith, with the result that many people abandon Christianity. He has personally spoken with people that have left Christianity and say that: "I have spoken with them and feel that *had not too much undue stress been laid on faith such a situation would not have arisen.*" Ibid. 48-49.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 48.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 48.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 49.

Matt 12:13: "...So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

Matt 12:6,8: "I tell you, there is something greater than the temple here... For the Son of man is sovereign over the Sabbath."

The main point stressed by Buddhadâsa here is that like Buddha, Jesus is a freethinker, who is not confined by traditional belief, but thinks for himself.<sup>34</sup>

Matt 15:18-20: "... But what comes out of the mouth has its origins in the heart; and that is what defiles a man. Wicked thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, perjury, slander, these all proceed from the heart; and these are the things that defile a man; but to eat without first washing his hands, that cannot defile him."

Buddhadâsa interprets this passage as expressing a rejection of superstitious and ritualistic practices; a similar rejection is found in Buddhism.<sup>35</sup>

Matt 12:50: This verse is not quoted, only paraphrased: "To him (Jesus) whoever does the will of his heavenly Father is his brother, his sister, his mother."

Buddhadâsa argues that Jesus did not regard the idea of family, as understood in Everyday language, as important. Because by referring to "whoever does the will of his heavenly Father" as family, Jesus obviously has gone beyond a common understanding of family. Buddhadâsa then goes on to interpret Jesus' statement in line with Buddhist understanding of holy men, who renounce family and lead "a life characterized by living with wisdom on the highest level."<sup>36</sup>

Buddhadâsa concludes that Christianity, like Buddhism, is a religion of wisdom, since in his reading of the Bible he finds the following points expressed. First, he finds that the passages stress wisdom and understanding rather than faith, which is equally the way of Buddhism. The second point of similarities is that biblical texts, like texts from *Tripitaka*, stress the freedom to think and reason freely, without being dependent on tradition. Thirdly, another important point, which implies that even Christianity is a religion of wisdom, is that rituals and superstitious practices are not encouraged. Finally, there are also texts in the Bible stressing the value of a life as a holy man renouncing traditional family life in order to search wisdom.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 50-51.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 51-52.

Based on his biblical reading, Buddhadâsa therefore concludes that Christianity like Buddhism is a religion of wisdom and *kamma*: "In the New Testament there are many points in agreement with Buddhism or the *Tripitaka* which account for the Buddhist attitude towards Christianity; namely that *the latter is a religion of action and of self-help based on wisdom*, and not a religion based on mere faith as is generally understood."<sup>37</sup>

### **The role of the "two-language" theory in Buddhadâsa's Bible interpretation**

When examining Buddhadâsa's Bible reading it becomes clear that his "two-language" theory is crucial to his interpretation. This can be seen most clearly in his discussion of Christianity as a religion of *kamma*. In his interpretation of faith understood as based on action, or as action itself, Buddhadâsa's use of the theory is his main hermeneutical approach. In relation to John 6:68, for example, he states that "eternal life" is to be interpreted as *Dhamma* language. Since *Dhamma* language is referring to the mental world and used when speaking about ultimate truth, "eternal life" is consequently interpreted as concerning ultimate truth. This fact established, it functions as a hermeneutical key to understand the whole passage. As *Dhamma* can only be comprehended by looking within or gaining insight through practice, Buddhadâsa infers that in order to gain eternal life, practice and understanding are needed, not faith. The same way of arguing is used concerning Matt 21:21 and 17:20. Here "mountain" is said to be *Dhamma* language, denoting "selfishness". To move a mountain is therefore to be understood as getting rid of selfishness. Since this is an important point related to the understanding of ultimate truth, a concentrated mind is needed to attain the right understanding. The concept "faith" in these passages is consequently interpreted in light of this as "a concentrated mind". The two-language theory is thus used to explain the difference between believing and understanding, faith and wisdom. Faith is interpreted in Everyday language as blind belief in authority, whereas in *Dhamma* language it denotes understanding. Likewise, in the passages that Buddhadâsa interprets as referring to the law of *kamma* (for example Matt 7:2), the key to interpret the passages is the language of *Dhamma*. According to his interpretation God plays the same role or has the same function as the law of *kamma*. Buddhadâsa therefore concludes that this is because in the language of *Dhamma*, both concepts refer back to the same reality and are thus identical.

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 59.

In the argumentation in support of Christianity as a religion of wisdom, the "two-language" theory is not so explicitly used as in the discussion of Christianity as a religion of *kamma*. In my opinion, however, the basic premises of the theory function as the backbone of Buddhādāsa's argument. First, we have seen that in the reading of, for example Matt 13: 20-21, 23, he presupposes the same contrast between faith and wisdom as we noted in the discussion of *kamma* in Christianity. This contrast is in Buddhādāsa's view related to a contrast between speaking and understanding Everyday language and *Dhamma* language. Further, in the discussion of Matt 7:4-5, Buddhādāsa compares *Dhammapada* and the Bible, in order to interpret the verse from Matthew. This approach is, as I see it, dependent on some important presuppositions for his "two-language" theory, namely on his understanding that truth is one and reflected in both the Bible and *Tripitaka*. Along the same lines, he also compares Jesus and Buddha in the discussion of Matt 12:6,8,13. This comparison is based on the understanding of both Buddha and Jesus as apostles of truth, and made possible by the main premise for the interpretation of *Dhamma* language, namely that truth is one. (See subsequent discussion under the heading: "Analysis of the hermeneutical presuppositions of Buddhādāsa's Bible interpretation").

We have now seen that the "two-language" theory functions as the main hermeneutical key in Buddhādāsa's Bible interpretation in relation to his discussion of Christianity as a religion of wisdom and *kamma*. In the next main section I will analyse in more detail the hermeneutical presuppositions of the theory, as Buddhādāsa has used it in Bible interpretation. Before that, however, the question of criteria for interpretation needs to be addressed.

### **Criteria for interpretation**

The presentation above raises both the question of what kinds of criteria one must use in order to attain a right interpretation of *Dhamma* language, and the criteria for distinguishing between words or passages, which are to be interpreted as Everyday language, *Dhamma* language, or both.

To take the last question first: How may one make an appropriate distinction between Everyday language and *Dhamma* language? According to my knowledge, Buddhādāsa does not discuss this issue explicitly. But as we have already seen, he argues that the referents of Everyday language and

*Dhamma* language differ. Therefore it may be inferred that by looking at the referents it can be decided whether to interpret the word or text in question as representing Everyday language or *Dhamma* language. In Buddhādāsa's discussion of some of the examples above he seems to be doing this, and he uses the context to decide whether the referent is the material or the spiritual/mental world. From my point of view, the problem with this, however, is that as Buddhādāsa emphasises that the insight of the interpreter is crucial for understanding *Dhamma* language, this criterion is therefore dependent on a person knowledgeable in *Dhamma* language to function. I will come back to this issue further down.

It is, however, possible to delineate a couple of other criteria from some of his writings. First, in his lecture "Two Kinds of Language", Buddhādāsa gives quite a few examples of how different words have possible meanings both in Everyday language and *Dhamma* language. At one point in this discussion about a word, he states: "...as this expression is understood in *Dhamma* language, as the Buddha has put it".<sup>38</sup> In order to get a right interpretation of *Dhamma* language, it seems, therefore, that one criterion is to ask for or detect what Buddha himself meant. But then we might ask further how to discern what in the scriptures reflect Buddha's own meaning and what do not. Secondly, it looks like there also is an implicit criterion at work in the fact that Buddhādāsa interprets all passages in scriptures concerning supernatural being, e.g. angels and demons as referring to mental states.<sup>39</sup>

Concerning the question of how to evaluate an interpretation of *Dhamma* language in terms of right and wrong interpretation, as far as I can see, Buddhādāsa only gives one explicit criterion, which focuses on the fruits of interpretation: *If an interpretation of any word in any religion leads to disharmony and does not positively further the welfare of the many, then such an interpretation is to be regarded as wrong; that is against the will of God, or as the working of Satan and Mara.*<sup>40</sup> He further argues in line with this that the present state of religions fighting each other instead of being

---

<sup>38</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "Two Kinds of Language: Everyday Language & Dhamma Language." 43, cf. also 30.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 32-37. Cf. also the discussion in Jackson. 76-82.

<sup>40</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, *Christianity and Buddhism*. 15.

an "effective device for solving the problems of daily existence"<sup>41</sup> is due to wrong interpretations, often due to a wrongful attachment to tradition.<sup>42</sup>

In his interpretation of Jesus' teaching, it is clear that Buddhадâsa's purpose is to show that there is a harmony between Buddhist and Christian teachings. As far as I can see, however, the main criterion that Buddhадâsa uses for his interpretation, is, whether the interpretation corresponds with the truth – which in Buddhадâsa's understanding is one. This truth (*Dhamma*) is available through right practice, through wisdom. According to Buddhадâsa, insight into the within of all things is necessary in order to grasp the truth and is a prerequisite for understanding *Dhamma* language. *Dhamma* language reflects this truth, or refers to this truth; therefore it is important that there is correspondence between the interpretation of *Dhamma* language and this truth.<sup>43</sup>

### **Analysis of the Hermeneutical Presuppositions of Buddhadâsa's Bible interpretation**

According to Buddhадâsa, Christianity has traditionally been interpreted as a religion of faith, a religion where there is a reliance on external help, understood as faith in God. Such interpretation is made in terms of Everyday language, says to Buddhадâsa. If interpreted in terms of *Dhamma* language Christianity, like Buddhism, emerges as a religion of action and of self-help based on wisdom. We have in the preceding section seen how he has argued for this point, basing his interpretation on selected Gospel passages. This interpretation depends on the use of the "two-language" theory and certain presuppositions entailed in the theory. I will in the following paragraphs outline what I see as the major presuppositions, which make Buddhадâsa's conclusion possible.

#### **The Bible contains both Everyday Language and *Dhamma* language**

As mentioned, the "two-language" theory functions as the main hermeneutical key in Buddhадâsa's Bible interpretation. It is a major presupposition in his Bible interpretation that the Bible, like the *Tripitaka*,

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 15-16.

<sup>43</sup> See the coming section for a discussion of these matters.

contains both Everyday language and *Dhamma* language.<sup>44</sup> As I see it, his main argument in support of this presupposition is that there is an apostle of truth in every nation. These apostles, who include Buddha and Jesus, have worked at different times and in different cultures; therefore the different religious scriptures use different languages and different ways of expression.<sup>45</sup> The main points of their teaching, however, are the same: "We can, however, expect that the essence of their message, as regards the truth, is the same."<sup>46</sup>

### **The Bible should be interpreted with regard to Everyday language and *Dhamma* language**

Because the Bible and other religious scriptures contain two kinds of languages it is crucial to be aware of this when interpreting. According to Buddhādāsa, a wise person knows both languages and should therefore always consider both possible meanings of a word.<sup>47</sup> That is, the literal meaning, related to the physical world and the spiritual meaning, related to the non-physical world. In his lecture, "Two kinds of language: Everyday language and *Dhamma* Language", Buddhādāsa gives many examples of how different

---

<sup>44</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, *Christianity and Buddhism*. 4-6. In *Christianity and Buddhism* Buddhādāsa gives many examples from the Bible, both from the Old Testament and from the Gospels, on the use of two languages. He first gives a couple of examples where it is his opinion that the words in question clearly have to be understood in terms of *Dhamma* language. One example is the understanding of the word "die" in Gen 2:17. Buddhādāsa argues that this word refers to physical death in Everyday language, whereas in *Dhamma* language it refers to spiritual death, which in this context has to be understood in terms of original sin and the suffering resulting thereof. Another example is the word "born anew" cited from John 3:3. The everyday meaning of this word would be physical rebirth, whereas in *Dhamma* language, Buddhādāsa argues, the word has to be interpreted as spiritual rebirth in this life. In the context of John 3 the word is to be understood as *Dhamma* language. He argues for this by referring also to John 3:6, where it is clearly stated, according to Buddhādāsa that there is both a physical and a spiritual birth. In a third example Buddhādāsa shows that the same word can have different meanings in different contexts. For example the word "life" has to be interpreted as Everyday language in Matt 20:28 and as *Dhamma* language in Matt 19:17. This shows that one can find both levels of meaning in the Bible, depending on context. A final example, from Matt 10:39, shows that not only single terms, but also whole passages can be expressed in the language of *Dhamma*.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 8-10, 24.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>47</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "Two Kinds of Language: Everyday Language & *Dhamma* Language." 17, 55.



words are understood dependent of whether they are interpreted as Everyday language or *Dhamma* language.<sup>48</sup> For example the word "Buddha", if interpreted as Everyday language, refers to the historical Gotama Buddha, but in *Dhamma* language the meaning is "the truth which the historical Buddha realised and taught".<sup>49</sup> Likewise, a word like "birth" has two different meanings depending on whether it is interpreted in everyday or *Dhamma* language. In Everyday language it denotes the idea of being physically born out of a woman's womb, while in *Dhamma* language the meaning is related to the idea of the ego. "Birth" in this sense is "the birth of the idea 'I' or 'ego' that arises in the mind throughout each day".<sup>50</sup>

Concerning the interpretation of Scripture, however, it is not to be taken for granted, that every word could be understood meaningfully at both levels in all contexts. Buddhādāsa argues that a wise person needs to be able to discern between the two languages, because even though most passages are to be understood as *Dhamma* language, some passages are to be interpreted as Everyday language if they are to be correctly interpreted. He refers to Buddha's own discourses where he finds that Buddha uses both Everyday language and *Dhamma* language, depending on whether he is speaking about everyday matters or about *Dhamma*.<sup>51</sup> One example from the Bible, which Buddhādāsa refers to, concerns the word "life". As he sees it, the term when used in Matt 20:28 clearly has to be interpreted as Everyday language, referring to physical life, whereas in Matt 19:17 "life" has to be interpreted as *Dhamma* language, meaning eternal life.<sup>52</sup>

It is Buddhādāsa's opinion that many misunderstandings between peoples of different religions have arisen because the type of language in scriptures has not been properly recognised and understood. This makes it very important to strive to give correct interpretation of religious scriptures with

---

<sup>48</sup> Among the words he discusses are: Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, Religion, Work, God, Heaven, Light, Eating, Marriage and Singing.

<sup>49</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "Two Kinds of Language: Everyday Language & Dhamma Language." 18.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 29. The attentive reader may have noticed that Buddhādāsa interprets the word "birth" in *Dhamma* language differently in the Buddhist and Christian context, cf. note 45. This discrepancy illustrates the problem of criteria for interpretation, and also the question of what kind of approach Buddhādāsa's two language theory are. Both these issues are discussed in this article.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>52</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, *Christianity and Buddhism*. 5.

regard to the two ways of expression found in them.<sup>53</sup> Put more positively, if people understand the language of *Dhamma* they will love their own religion and stick to it. Furthermore, there will be mutual understanding between religions, and harmony and peace will prevail. For Buddhadâsa the conclusion is therefore that one should strive to interpret religious terms in line with the language of *Dhamma*, as this will contribute positively to the world.<sup>54</sup> "God' has given us the way which is correct and complete in all respects, but we ourselves have interpreted that way wrongly."<sup>55</sup>

### ***Dhamma* language refers to the ultimate truth**

In *Christianity and Buddhism* Buddhadâsa states that Buddhists can accept all passages of Christianity as in agreement with the Buddha's teaching, provided they are allowed to interpret the language of *Dhamma* in the Bible in their own terms.<sup>56</sup> What does he imply by this statement? According to my understanding the implication becomes very clear in Buddhadâsa's discussion of Christianity as a religion of wisdom and *kamma*, where for example, when he discusses God and the law of *kamma* explicitly states that these concepts refer to the same truth: "The underlying truths which make man receive the fruits of his actions are one and the same!"<sup>57</sup> This statement illustrates what I regard as Buddhadâsa's main hermeneutic presupposition for the "two-language" theory, namely that there exists one underlying truth, which is the ultimate truth, and that *Dhamma* language is referring to this truth.<sup>58</sup> Buddhadâsa presupposes, as we have seen earlier, a certain view of the world, or reality, which forms the basis of his two-language theory, namely a distinction between the physical, outside element

<sup>53</sup> Buddhadasa stresses this point through highlighting three negative consequences of confusing the language of *Dhamma* with Everyday language. I will shortly mention them here. Firstly, not understanding the language of *Dhamma* has in many cases led to dissatisfaction with one's own religion and consequently led to the search for a better religion. Secondly, not understanding the language of *Dhamma* has led to schisms within religions and between religions. Thirdly, not understanding the language of *Dhamma* has as a consequence contributed to lack of harmony and peace in the world. Ibid. 6-8.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 14-15.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 16-17.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of *Dhamma* as absolute truth, see Buddhadâsa Bhikkhu, "No Religion!," in *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadâsa*, ed. Donald K. Swearer, Suny Series in Buddhist Studies (Dehli: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991).

of reality and the non-physical, inside element. *Dhamma* is the truth hidden within all things; without understanding the within of things, through *Dhamma* language, true knowledge and understanding are not possible.<sup>59</sup>

### **The Bible and *Tripitaka* refer to the same truth**

There is also another related presupposition in Buddhādāsa's theory, which is implicated in his statement that Buddhists can agree on Christian teaching if they are allowed to interpret the language of *Dhamma* in the Bible in their own terms. What he refers to is that even though the language of *Dhamma* refers to what is the truth, the terms used to refer to this truth can be different in different traditions. Buddhādāsa states, for example, that the law of *kamma* and God are two different terms for the same truth, and argues that the differences between Christianity and Buddhism are only superficial. On the level of Everyday language it looks as if there are many differences, but on the level of *Dhamma* language both religions, as well as their scriptures, refer to the same truth and point to the same reality.<sup>60</sup>

As a consequence the differences between the religions are, according to Buddhādāsa, a matter of misunderstanding or misinterpretation. Truth is one, and an interpretation through *Dhamma* language will reveal this, as we have seen demonstrated in Buddhādāsa's interpretation of Christianity as a religion of wisdom and *kamma*. The truth is reflected in the scriptures of both Christianity and Buddhism, but in order to understand it the *Dhamma* language in the scriptures must be correctly interpreted. This point leads us to the last issue concerning hermeneutical presuppositions that I will address, namely the question of the interpreter.

### **An interpreter with insight is needed**

A very important presupposition of Buddhādāsa's theory seems to be the existence of an insightful interpreter. Since *Dhamma* language, referring to the truth, can be expressed in different ways in different scriptures, the role of the interpreter becomes important. Buddhādāsa's theory does, as noticed

---

<sup>59</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "Looking Within." 63-64, 67-68.

<sup>60</sup> Donald K. Swearer puts it like this in his note 3 to Buddhādāsa's article "No Religion": "In Buddhadasa's view, truth is truth in the sense that truth is one and indivisible. Buddhadasa's 'relativism' exists at the level of 'everyday' or ordinary language (...), but not at the level of dhamma language." Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "No Religion!." 228.

above, presuppose a certain ontology, but it also presupposes a certain epistemology. Buddhādāsa stresses that "in order to be able to speak and understand this *Dhamma* language, one must have gained insight into the mental world. Consequently, only people who have seen the *Dhamma*, the Truth, speak the *Dhamma* language".<sup>61</sup> As not everyone has gained this insight it follows that not everyone masters the *Dhamma* language. Persons who master both kinds of languages are regarded as wise persons,<sup>62</sup> in contrast with persons speaking only the Everyday language. These are regarded as foolish, deluded, ignorant etc. people.<sup>63</sup>

Before we go on to ask how the insight into the mental world is acquired, we will shortly address the question of the relationship between knowing *Dhamma* language and understanding *Dhamma* itself. There might be an inconsistency in Buddhādāsa's argumentation concerning this matter, because in the same speech ("Two Kinds of Languages: Everyday language and *Dhamma* Language") he also states that *Dhamma* language is a prerequisite for understanding *Dhamma*: "If we don't know the language of *Dhamma*, then we can't understand *Dhamma*."<sup>64</sup> "People don't know *Dhamma* language. Not knowing *Dhamma* language, they cannot comprehend *Dhamma*."<sup>65</sup> But as we have already seen, Buddhādāsa argues that insight into the mental world and *Dhamma* is necessary in order to be able to speak and understand *Dhamma* language.<sup>66</sup> One way to interpret these seemingly inconsistent statements is to presume that Buddhādāsa implies a circular process, where insight into the mental world and *Dhamma*, speaking and understanding *Dhamma* language, and understanding or comprehending *Dhamma* belong together in a hermeneutical circle.

How then does a person gain insight into the mental world and into *Dhamma*? Buddhādāsa regards the non-physical world to be as real as the physical world. He stresses that while the mental, non-physical world is

<sup>61</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "Two Kinds of Language: Everyday Language & *Dhamma* Language." 16.

<sup>62</sup> See for example Ibid. 17-18 and 55.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 37, 20, 44. Buddhādāsa distinguishes between the childish level of Everyday language and the deeper level of the language of *Dhamma*. 20, 49.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 53.

<sup>66</sup> cf. Buddhādāsa's definition of *Dhamma* language given earlier in this article: "Dhamma language is the language spoken by people who have gained a deep insight into the Truth, Dhamma."

hidden for anyone who looks merely at the outside of things, it is not hidden to those who have attained enlightenment. For example, to the historical Buddha the mental world was known as easily as the physical world.<sup>67</sup> But because the non-physical world is available and understood only through a person's mind, it follows that the less superficial elements can only be perceived if looked at from within, not only at the without.<sup>68</sup> Only through looking within, that is at the mind, is it possible to understand *Dhamma*, since "*Dhamma* is the truth that lies hidden in all things; it is the within of all things".<sup>69</sup> Buddhādāsa explicitly states that:

If you don't practice looking within, you never will recognise *Dhamma* and the language of *Dhamma*; you will know only Everyday language...But if you practice looking at things the right way, and penetrate to the truth of *Dhamma* language, you become a knower of truth and no one can deceive you.<sup>70</sup>

One may therefore conclude that insight into the mental side, and consequently into *Dhamma*, is gained through insight into the mind. This insight is acquired through practice, through looking at things the right way. According to Buddhādāsa, this can be achieved through mindfulness and wisdom, in observing the workings of the mind.<sup>71</sup> The way to understand or get insight into the truth is through practice, that is to "look within", to understand the workings of the mind, the mental side of things. Therefore, in order to get an interpretation of *Dhamma* language, which corresponds to the truth, an interpreter with insight into this truth is needed.

---

<sup>67</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "Looking Within." 63.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 63-64.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 67-68. The quote is from page 68.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 60, 71. A presentation of Buddhādāsa's discussion of the way to practice mindfulness and wisdom goes beyond the scope of this paper, but for a short introduction see for example Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, *Handbook for Mankind* (Bangkok: Dhammasapa). 93-153. Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu and condensed by Chien Nurn Eng, *A Handbook for a Perfect Form of Anapanasati-Bhavana*, trans. Bhikkhu James RatanaNantho (Bangkok: Mental Health Publishing House, 2003).

## Conclusion and Critical Assessment

I have in this paper presented and analysed Buddhadâsa's interpretation of selected passages from the Gospels and shown that his "two-language" theory is crucial to his way of reading the Bible texts, and consequently fundamental to the conclusions he reaches on the basis of his interpretation. The theory is based on the understanding that all religions and their scriptures reflect *Dhamma*, which is the truth valid for all. This truth is expressed in *Dhamma* language. While Everyday language is a language used and understood by all people, *Dhamma* language is available only for those who through insight and experience have comprehended *Dhamma*. As a consequence, the religious truth in the different religions and scriptures are only available for people with such insight and knowledge. In Buddhadâsa's theory it is, as I have interpreted it, presupposed that if one is to master *Dhamma* language one must not only acquire insight and experience, but also share the basic view that all religions are instruments for *Dhamma*, and that they bring *Dhamma* knowledge to those who read their holy scriptures or listen to their apostles. On the one hand, it may therefore be argued that Buddhadâsa thereby opts for a Mahayana and not a Theravada kind of Buddhism, in that he opens up for several possible ways to gain enlightenment, including Christianity as one of these ways. On the other hand, however, as he clearly defines *Dhamma* within the framework of Theravada Buddhism, we may argue that he rather has reinterpreted Christianity to fit in with a Theravada perspective.

In the examples of Bible interpretation given by Buddhadâsa himself, it becomes clear that for him, Jesus teaches about wisdom and *kamma*, and he thus concludes that Christianity is a religion of wisdom and *kamma*. From my point of view, it is not given, however, that two or more informed readers, who both apply *Dhamma* language will reach the same conclusion about the religious truths in the scriptures as Buddhadâsa expected. But Buddhadâsa would certainly have argued that if the interpreters have insight into the truth, their interpretation would correspond with *Dhamma*. I think this makes clear that Buddhadâsa's approach must rather be seen as an attempt to find a common perspective to be applied in interpretation rather than a concrete method of textual interpretation

In my opinion, when Buddhadâsa used *Dhamma* language to interpret those Gospel texts, which he considered as giving important insight into Jesus' teaching – and thus Christian teaching – he showed an inclusive Buddhist perspective, where the main criterion for the use of *Dhamma* interpretation of texts is that the interpretations must reflect *Dhamma* itself. He interpreted the texts on the level of *Dhamma* language according to a set frame of reference, namely the understanding of *Dhamma* as the absolute truth.

How does Buddhadâsa's approach appear in a wider context of inter-religious dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism? First, he uses an eclectic approach to Christian Scripture, which many Christian interpreters will not agree with. The Bible he uses is reduced to the New Testament – and in the New Testament, the Gospels – and in the Gospels he focuses on the sayings of Jesus alone. The Old Church was soon to discourage attempts to eliminate the Old Testament, as for example Marcion tried, or attempts to eliminate parts of the New Testament. Buddhadâsa would probably rightly have argued that the sayings of Jesus have a key function in the New Testament, but by only addressing these and none of the other New Testament texts in his discussion of Christianity as a religion of wisdom and *kamma*, the platform for a dialogue on these questions is far too limited to gain acceptance in a wider circle of Christian interpreters.<sup>72</sup>

Second, he does not abide by one of the chief principles in modern inter-religious dialogue, namely, in this case, letting a Christian believer, an insider, present his/her view of what is an authentic Christian understanding, as e.g. expressed in the World Council of Churches' "Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies".<sup>73</sup> Instead he may be criticised for claiming the right to define what Christianity is really about, and in doing so closing the doors for further constructive dialogue. On the other hand, he has the right to present his understanding of Christianity, which he also does through his biblical interpretations. In my opinion, therefore, his discussion about the Gospel texts in the lectures about Christianity and Buddhism is an interesting, and thought-provoking example of how a

---

<sup>72</sup> It has already been noted, however, in the introduction to this article, that his approach to Bible is consistent with his approach to the Buddhist scriptures. He considers what he regards as the authentic teaching of "the apostles of truth" as more valuable than both earlier historical material and later expositions of their teachings.

<sup>73</sup> See page 6 of 10 in WCC's "Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies." <http://www.wcc-coe.org>

Buddhist interprets the Bible. His interpretations gives us some indications of how a learned Buddhist may understand and relate to Christian faith, and as such his reading of selected Gospel texts is an important contribution to the Buddhist-Christian encounter.

## References

- Buddhadâsa Bhikkhu. *Handbook for Mankind*. Bangkok: Dhammasapa.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Christianity and Buddhism*. Translated by Venerable Punno, Mr. B. Siamwala, Mr. Hajji Prayoon Vadanyakul and a unknown person. Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lecture, Fifth Series. Bangkok: Sublime Life Mission, 1967.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Buddha-Dhamma for Students*. Translated by Roderick S. Bucknell. 2nd. ed. Bangkok: Vuddhidhamma Fund, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Looking Within." In *Key to Natural Truth*, ed. Santikaro Bhikkhu, 57-89. Bangkok: The Dhamma Study & Practice Group, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Two Kinds of Language: Everyday Language & Dhamma Language." In *Key to Natural Truth*, ed. Santikaro Bhikkhu, 13-55. Bangkok: The Dhamma Study & Practice Group, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "No Religion!" In *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadâsa*, ed. Donald K. Swearer, 146-155. Dehli: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991.
- Buddhadâsa Bhikkhu, and condensed by Chien Nurn Eng. *A Handbook for a Perfect Form of Anapanasati-Bhavana*. Translated by Bhikkhu James RatanaNantho. Bangkok: Mental Health Publishing House, 2003.
- Jackson, Peter A. *Buddhadâsa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand*. 2nd ed. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003.
- Promta, Somparn. "Buddhist Studies in Thailand." In *The State of Buddhist Studies in the World 1972-1997*, ed. Donald K. Swearer and Somparn Promta, 1-32. Bangkok: Center for Buddhist Studies Chulalongkorn University, 2000.
- Santikaro Bhikkhu. "Jesus and Christianity in the Life and Work of Buddhadâsa Bhikkhu." In *Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus: Papers of the Third Conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies (St.Ottilien 1999)*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Thomas Josef Götz and Gerhard Köberlin, 80-103. St. Ottilien: EOS-Verlag, 2001.



- Sirikanchana, Pataraporn. "Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and the Buddhist Hermeneutics." In *Radical Conservatism: Buddhism in the Contemporary World. Articles in Honour of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa's 84th Birthday Anniversary*, ed. Sulak Sivaraksa, Pracha Hutanuvatra and Nicholas P. Kholer, 245-250. Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development and International Network of Engaged Buddhists, 1990.
- Swearer, Donald K. *Dialogue: The Key to Understanding Other Religions* Biblical Perspectives on Current Issues, ed. Howard Clark Kee. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Buddha, Buddhism and Bhikku Buddhadasa." In *Radical Conservatism: Buddhism in the Contemporary World. Articles in Honour of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa's 84th Birthday Anniversary*, ed. Sulak Sivaraksa, Pracha Hutanuvatra and Nicholas P. Kholer, 230-244. Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development and International Network of Engaged Buddhists, 1990.